

**IN-SIGHT:**

**LEOPOLD KIESLING. THE MYTH OF MARS AND VENUS WITH CUPID**

Upper Belvedere  
15 February to 12 May, 2019



Leopold Kiesling, Mars und Venus mit Amor  
Foto: Johannes Stoll © Belvedere, Wien

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Love triumphs over war – this motif, popular since antiquity, was adopted by Leopold Kiesling in his life-size sculpture group *Mars and Venus with Cupid*, completed in 1809. The Upper Austrian sculptor thus struck a chord with the times, for soon after an imperial decision dominated political and social life: the marriage of Archduchess Marie Louise of Austria to Napoleon I. This marriage was intended to put an end to the long-lasting turmoil of war in Europe once and for all. Against this background, Kiesling's marble group became a symbol of peace. The Belvedere is now dedicating an exhibition to this work of art.

This is the first time that the IN-SIGHT series at the Upper Belvedere has placed a single work in the spotlight of an exhibition. The series showcases the sculpture group *Mars and Venus with Cupid* as an art-historical masterpiece and, in a second room, highlights and documents the historical background of its creation and its political symbolism.

*"With this exhibition we are not only unveiling a key work from our collection, but also shedding light on an important historical epoch in Europe from the vantage point of politics and the staging of art,"* says Stella Rollig, Director General of the Belvedere.

**The exhibition focuses on three distinct aspects of its content:** One, is that Kiesling's sculpture group is one of the foremost works of Classicism in Austria. Another is that the symbolism of peace inherent in the work was equated with expectations triggered in Europe for the March 1810 wedding in Vienna between the Austrian Emperor's daughter Marie Louise and Napoleon I. Even years later, the sculpture was still interpreted in the context of this event. Finally, the sculpture group is closely linked to the history of the Belvedere, where it was

situated from the beginning of the 19th century. The location was deliberately chosen in the run-up to the Congress of Vienna to illustrate Austria's great commitment to peace in Europe.

Curator Sabine Grabner: *"of particular interest are the various subject areas surrounding this object. The first thing that captivates the eye, of course, is the high sculptural workmanship and the haptic quality of the Carrara marble. Then again, the mythologizing of Marie Louise's marriage to Napoleon is equally fascinating because, as Venus did, the Archduchess was also intended to wrest the sword from her 'Mars' and thus give Europe the peace it longed for."*

**Leopold Kiesling (Schöneben/Upper Austria 1770–1827 Vienna)** created the work while in Rome on an imperial scholarship. He spent several years there within the circle of Antonio Canova and Bertel Thorvaldsen; highly regarded by these exemplary artists, Kiesling in his day was considered Austria's most important sculptor.

**The work and its meaning and interpretation:** Mars, the god of war, is persuaded by Venus to cease all fighting and hand over his sword to Cupid. This symbolism of peace is borrowed from ancient mythology and enjoyed great popularity at the time of the creation of Kiesling's work. Against the background of the Napoleonic Wars, the motif gained additional urgency. Nevertheless, Kiesling was one of the earliest artists in Rome to execute it on a life-size scale. When the sculpture arrived in Vienna in June 1810, it was instantly interpreted within the context of the wedding between the daughter of Emperor Franz II (I.), Marie Louise, and Napoleon I. The dynastic alliance between Austria and France was meant to ensure the equalization of powers in Europe. This was seen as embodied in Kiesling's work. Rumor had it that the sculpture had been commissioned on the occasion of the marriage – an erroneous assumption that can be found in textbooks to this day. The imperial family considered the theme of the group sculpture a gift: comparison with the mythological couple served to ennoble the dynastic commitment at hand. The Belvedere was soon chosen as a publicly accessible exhibition venue. Since the end of the 18th century, the Imperial Picture Gallery had been housed here. It was of particular importance during the Congress of Vienna: as congress participants and other noteworthy individuals walked the Imperial Picture Gallery, Kiesling's *Mars and Venus with Cupid* served as a reminder of the theme's significance to Europe.

The sculpture was presented in the so-called Rondell, the ground-level room which today houses the café.

**The exhibition series IN-SIGHT at the Upper Belvedere** was conceived to show works from the museum's own holdings and examine them from a scholarly point of view. This exhibition is a prime example of how works of art can demonstrate the close connection between art history, natural history, political history, and the history of the museum.

**In the exhibition catalogue**, Ingeborg Schemper-Sparholz writes of the artistic significance of the group sculpture, while Sabine Grabner sheds light on its history and Werner Telesko explains the historical background of the marriage of Archduchess Marie Louise to Napoleon I.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition titel	In-Sight: Leopold Kiesling. The Myth of Mars and Venus with Cupid
Exhibition duration	15 February 2019 to 12 May 2019
Venue	Upper Belvedere
Exhibits	17
Curator	Sabine Grabner
Catalogue	Leopold Kiesling. Der Mythos von Mars und Venus mit Amor Reihe: Im Blick Herausgeberinnen: Stella Rollig, Sabine Grabner Autor_innen: Sabine Grabner, Stella Rollig, Ingeborg Schemper-Sparholz, Werner Telesko Grafikdesign: Atelier Liska Wesle; 120 Seiten, 54 Abbildungen; Format: 16,5 × 23,5 cm, Softcover; Deutsche Ausgabe ISBN 978-3-903114-71-5; EUR 19,-
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